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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews the population characteristics of migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their children. Since the 1960s, federal programs for migrant workers and their families have multiplied. However, these programs have differing definitions for "migrant and seasonal farmworker," and no current data system provides a reliable count or profile of migrant children. In 1989 the U.S. Department of Labor initiated the National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS) to address fears that immigration reform would result in farm labor shortages. Considered by some researchers to be the best data currently available, NAWS suggests that, in 1989-91, there were about 840,000 migrant farmworkers who had 409,000 children traveling with them. Of these children, 36,000 also did farmwork. An additional 169,000 youth were farmworkers traveling without their parents. Migrant farmworkers were primarily Hispanics (94%), born in Mexico (80%), married with children (52%), in the United States without their families (59%), and mostly men (82%). Migrant farmworkers are the largest needy labor force in the United States. Their numbers are unlikely to diminish as labor-intensive crops make up over a third of total U.S. crop sales. Economic dislocation in rural Mexico is expected to accelerate Mexican immigration in the 1990s, and many new immigrants will speak Indian languages rather than Spanish. Programs that serve migrant farmworkers and their children will need flexibility to deal with this changing population. (SV)

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MIGRANT FARMWORKERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

ERIC DIGEST

by Philip Martin

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Migrant Farmworkers and their Children

by Philip Martin

ERIC DIGEST

This digest reviews the population characteristics of migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their children. No current data system provides a reliable count or profile of migrant children, but a data-gathering initiative launched in 1989 to determine the effects of the Immigration Reform and Control Act on agriculture suggests that there are about 840,000 migrant farmworkers who have 409,000 children traveling with them as they do farmwork.

According to these data, the typical migrant child today shuttles between one U.S. and one Mexican residence, rather than following the crops from one U.S. residence to another. However, farmworkers and the farm labor market are changing rapidly in the face of immigration reforms, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and structural changes in Mexico and Latin America, making a better database on farmworkers and their children more important than ever.

Expansion of Federal Efforts to Serve Migrants

The 1960s image of a migrant farmworker depicted a hardworking White, Black, or Hispanic family who lived during the winter months in southern Florida, southern Texas, or central California. Every spring, they followed the sun northward to harvest ripening crops from New York to Michigan to Washington.

The federal government began programs in the 1960s to help migrant workers and their families to escape from "the migrant stream." In 1965, observers estimated there were 466,000 migrant farmworkers, most of whom were U.S. citizens. Many of these workers traveled across state lines with their families to harvest crops.

During the era of the Civil Rights Movement, federal assistance was provided to overcome the reluctance of state and local governments to assist migrant workers who were in the area for only a short time. Many communities wanted migrants to depart as soon as the harvest was over. For example, 39 states in 1960 had welfare regulations that required recipients to be residents of the area from 6 months to 3 years (*Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Powerlessness*, 1970-71).

During the 1970s and 1980s, federal programs for migrant workers and their families multiplied. Today the 12 major migrant and seasonal programs for farmworkers spend over $600 million annually, which is equivalent to about 10 percent of what the 1 million migrant and seasonal farmworkers earn in wages (Martin & Martin, 1994).

However, none of these federal migrant and seasonal farmworker programs has the same definition of *migrant* or *seasonal farmworker*, and many programs have expanded their definitions over time. For these reasons, there are no time series data that allow analysts to chart the number of migrant farmworkers and their children over time. During the 1980s, when Congress expressed interest in the number and legal status of farmworkers to project the effects of immigration reform on U.S. agriculture, the data problems were described as a harvest of confusion (Martin, 1988).

What Current Labor Department Data Show

This Digest summarizes data about worker characteristics drawn from the National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS). The NAWS study was initiated by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1989 to address fears that immigration reforms were likely to result in farm labor shortages. Other federal databases exist: The Department of Agriculture Farm Labor Survey includes information on farmworkers and their children based on data collected from farm employers about workers they employed during a particular week, and the Department of Education's Migrant Student Record Transfer System includes data on students identified as having parents who are or were migrant farmworkers. Farm labor researchers consider the NAWS data, however, to be the best data currently available. (For reviews of other farm labor data sources, see Martin & Martin, 1994.)

NAWS data examines migrant farmworkers as a category of workers in the total farm labor force. According to the study, there are about 5 million persons employed sometime each year to work on the nation's 800,000 farms that hire labor. About 2 million of these workers help to produce crops. Crop production involves more seasonal employment peaks and troughs than livestock production, hence, most migrant and seasonal farmworkers are employed on crop farms. About half of these 2 million crop workers are employed more than one month in agriculture, but less than 10 months; which translates into about 1 million American workers depending on seasonal farm jobs for most of their annual earnings (Mines, Gabbard, & Samardick, 1993). In the absence of a single federal definition for migrant farmworkers, the NAWS study defined migrants as workers who travel 75 or more miles in search of crop work. About 42 percent of the 7,200 workers interviewed while doing crop farm jobs between 1989 and 1991 fit this definition of migrant workers. This suggests that approximately 840,000 of the nation's 2 million crop workers are migrants. Migrant and seasonal farmworkers average about $5 hourly for 1,000 hours of work, for an average income of $5,000 annually.

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The NAWS study revealed that the migrant farmworkers were

- primarily Hispanics (94 percent),
- born in Mexico (80 percent),
- married with children (52 percent),
- doing farmwork in the U.S. without their families (59 percent),
- mostly men (82 percent), and
- are today, or were until 1987-88, unauthorized workers (67 percent).

NAWS interviewers obtained job histories from each worker interviewed, and this enabled them to distinguish among three different groups of migrant farmworkers:

- about 280,000 followed the crops from farm to farm and often from state to state;
- about 700,000 workers shuttled into the U.S. from homes abroad, usually in Mexico, but then remained at one U.S. residence while they did farmwork; and
- about 140,000 of the workers first shuttled into the U.S. from homes abroad and then followed the crops, and are thus double counted in the first two groups.

These migrant farmworkers together are accompanied by about 409,000 children. Of the children, 373,000 traveled with their parents and did not do farmwork, while 36,000 traveled and also did farmwork. In addition, the NAWS data suggest that there are 169,000 youth who travel at least 75 miles to do farmwork without their parents.

It should be emphasized that the data on migrant farmworkers and their children are remarkably inadequate. The data presented here could be misconstrued to suggest that there are fewer migrant children than the target populations of some of the federal programs designed to serve migrants and their families. For example, the Migrant Education Program serves the children of year-round workers employed on livestock farms (if they moved within the last 6 years) and also serves the children of workers employed in food processing plants in which there is a high turnover among the workers. Labor laws consider this last group of workers nonfarmworkers; not all migrant workers work on farms.

Other federal programs serve fewer workers than are indicated by this description. The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) 402 program, for example, casts a wide net to include migrant and seasonal farmworkers employed in nonfarm packinghouse and processing operations. However, JTPA limits eligibility for its services to workers legally authorized to be in the United States who are employed at least 25 days in agriculture and who obtain at least 50 percent of their earnings from farmwork, or spend 50 percent of their working time doing farmwork.

Implications for Migrant Programs

Migrant farmworkers are probably the largest needy workforce in the United States. Evidence exists that migrant children's chances for success in the U.S. economy are hurt rather than helped by their parents' occupation (National Commission on Agricultural Workers, 1992).

The situation is not likely to go away by itself, either. Labor-intensive crop production in the U.S. has increased at a pace faster than that at which labor-saving machines have displaced farmworkers (Martin, 1990). The value of U.S.-produced fruits and nuts, vegetables and melons, and horticultural specialties such as flowers and mushrooms reached $30 billion in 1991, 38 percent of the value of total U.S. crop sales (U.S. Department of Agriculture). To put this growing sector of U.S. agriculture in perspective, the value of only four of the hand-harvested commodities—oranges, grapes, apples, and lettuce—exceeds the value of the U.S. wheat crop.

NAFTA is unlikely to change the role of the U.S. as North America's fruit and salad bowl, largely because most fruits and vegetables are harvested in the fall, during the season when Mexican production is lowest (Martin, 1993). But NAFTA and economic restructuring in Mexico is changing the characteristics of migrant farmworkers and their children. Displacement and dislocation in rural Mexico, where 30 million people have an average income of less than $1,000 annually, is expected to accelerate Mexico-to-U.S. migration in the 1990s. Some of these new migrant children will likely speak Indian languages rather than Spanish.

Migrant and seasonal farmworker service providers thus may see their roles evolve into being the primary government-funded service group addressing the needs of new immigrants to the U.S. In this capacity, they will be dealing with children who may not speak English or Spanish, and whose parents may not know whether they will want or be able to remain in the U.S. For these reasons, migrant programs that serve migrant farmworkers' children will need flexibility to deal with an ever-changing population as we move through the last years of this century.

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